

Red storm falling?

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Leader of the Communist Party of Ukraine Petro Symonenko has a real chance to loose not only the forthcoming presidential election, but also the leadership of his own party. Although likely to join the incumbent president in the short list of two top candidates who will make it to the second round, Mr. Symonenko is equally unlikely to win. Paradoxically, if the Communist leader stays in the race till the very end and loses to the incumbent president (or any other candidate), he may have to step down from his position of the party leader. If he withdraws from the race - not in favor of any of the candidates, but claiming, as they have done so far, that Communists stand for the abolition of the presidency, or finding another suitable reason - he will probably manage to save face and keep his seat.

Aware of the challenge, Mr. Symonenko has been doing his best to ensure that rank-and-file members and traditional communist voters see him as the only possible leader of the CPU, simultaneously with giving hints to the authorities that he is prepared to compromise.

Mr. Symonenko's campaign pledges reproduce the 1917 October Revolution slogans: he vows to give jobs and wages to workers, pensions to labor veterans, scholarships to students and "decent living to the people". Nothing new or radical, like nationalization of property, has been formally offered. The leadership of the Communist party is prepared to make steps towards a specific form of understanding with the country's authorities. Recently, Petro Symonenko and his party have demonstrated the ability to come to terms with a variety of "class rivals" on the issues differing from criticizing his fellow left-wingers to the appointment of the parliament's representatives to the Board of the National Bank of Ukraine, a newly-established entity able to curb substantially the relative independence of the NBU. The strife for gaining access to decision-making and policy-influencing through "better understanding" with the authorities will grow with the growing number of "pragmatic" party members who have their own business interests. In this context, transformation of the Communist party into the key official opposition that has to be taken into account, appeased and allowed its share of every common pie may be the best bargain the Communists can expect in exchange for their "non-alignment" with other left-wingers in the presidential race.

The observations that suggest the change of attitude in the CPU leadership to the state power in general and the current authorities in particular can be supported by Mr. Symonenko's rejection of the offer to join the deal signed by Oleksandr Moroz, Oleksandr Tkachenko, Yevhen Marchuk and Volodymyr Oliynyk in the town of Kaniv on August 24, the 8th anniversary of Ukraine's independence. The four candidates formed an anti-Kuchma coalition and announced their decision to select only one candidate among them who will run for presidency with the others calling on their respective constituencies to support him. Giving no clear reasons for his refusal to join the "Kaniv Four", Petro Symonenko argued that it had been the Communist party that initiated the idea of the only opposition candidate. He admitted that the party's proposals had "found different evaluation and different understanding among allies in the left-wing block", but omitted the fact that the "only candidate" the party ever agreed to support was himself. Although his own declared perspectives on key issues of power, property, land ownership, foreign policy and social security guarantees offer nothing original instead of his usual rhetoric of "liquidation of the current system" and the "anti-people regime", Mr. Symonenko criticizes the "Kaniv Four" for the lack of facts and specific agenda. Meanwhile, his comments reflected his understanding that in case of joining his chances to become "the only candidate" would be slim and the challenge of losing the leadership of his own party even more realistic.

As often in similar situations, it is Leonid Kuchma who is likely to benefit most of all from the "Kaniv agreement". According to Yevhen Kushnariov, former presidential chief of staff, a leader of Prime Minister Pustovoitenko's People's Democratic Party (PDP) and one of Kuchma's campaign managers, the "Kaniv Four" helped the Kuchma campaign a lot. Joining forces with socialist Oleksandr Moroz has already cost Yevhen Marchuk a substantial share of support in Western Ukraine. Leonid Kuchma received a new group to point to as a personified danger of the "red relapse" and a threat of return to the collective socialist past. To date, at least 80 parties and public organizations announced their support for Leonid Kuchma at a recent Assembly of the block of political parties that had offered their backing to the incumbent president's campaign. Mr. Kushnariov did not mention the fact that most of those organizations have too close connections with high-ranking civil servants that are not allowed to use public resources or take part in election campaigns except in their free, off-duty time. Declaring communists to be the main opponents of the "reforms" and having them respond with condemning the

current executive authorities (though, adding nothing new or personal to general claims and accusations of the "regime") seems to suit both parties' purposes well.

Without Symonenko as an ally, a simple sum of the four candidates' ratings shows that the chances of one of them to win in the first round due to collecting the others' potential votes remain problematic. Yet, the incumbent president's campaign staff is not going to rely on calculations and well-founded hopes that the four will not be joined by Petro Symonenko and Natalia Vitrenko. For the first time since the election Oleksandr Tkachenko to the position of the Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament and President Kuchma's repeated statements about "constructive cooperation" with the Speaker, supported by the latter's claims he would not run for presidency, the press remembered the muffled scandal over Zemlya i Liudy, suspected of misusing about US\$ 70 million American loan. In 1993, Mr. Tkachenko's association Zemlya i Liudy received the government-guaranteed loan due to falsification of its status (i.e., presenting a commercial entity as a state-owned body operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture). Shortly afterwards, over 60% of over 800 collective and state farms, involved in implementation of the Zemlya i Liudy project, announced their bankruptcy. As a result, the Ukreximbank had to pay US\$50 million to the American lender. The story may receive the increasing coverage, as it becomes likely that Oleksandr Tkachenko will be the candidate the "Kaniv Four" will nominate.

The likely increase in sanctioned negative press coverage is not the only "election technology" to be used. Oleksandr Yeliashkevych, MP, Head of the ad-hoc special parliamentary commission for providing for voters' rights during the presidential election, has recently told the press he believes everything is being done by the incumbent president's campaign staff to ensure that Leonid Kuchma's opponent in the second round of the election is Petro Symonenko. He argues that too many local election commissions - bodies that have real possibilities to influence the voting procedure and vote counting - are led by representatives of the incumbent president. According to the election law, every local election commission should include two representatives of political parties or blocks candidates of which take part in the race. To date, representatives of the incumbent president lead 129 out of 225 territorial election commissions. In the Kherson region, two chairmen of local election commissions represent simultaneously two candidates each: the incumbent president and Petro Symonenko. Five out of ten Crimean election commissions are chaired by representatives of Leonid Kuchma, while the other five are led by representatives of Petro Symonenko. All in all, over 33 thousand local election commissions will work at the election. The fact that the incumbent president has repeatedly referred to Mr. Symonenko as his "most serious competitor" whom he will probably meet in the second round suggests that Mr. Kuchma has selected himself a rival that will leave no choice to those who will never vote for the chief Communist of Ukraine. Petro Symonenko's likely election failure, in tune with the long-standing communist tradition, may prompt the party elite to react with "organizational conclusions" and change the leader. If that happens, there are at least several candidates who potentially can pick up the leadership from Mr. Symonenko's hands. They include, primarily, Speaker of the Crimean parliament Leonid Grach, Vice Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament Adam Martyniuk, former first secretary of the Soviet-time CPU and private businessman Stanislav Hurenko, member of the parliament's "strategic" Committee for Fuel and Energy Complex, Nuclear Policy and Nuclear Safety Yevhen Marmazov. In addition to managing to create themselves a steady political image, they have demonstrated ability to find grounds for compromise with the executive authorities. Hence, instead of a "red relapse", Ukraine may receive a more flexible and pragmatic Communist party, pleased with the role of the "constructive opposition" and aware of benefits the new social formation they have condemned so vigorously can bring.